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March 2010

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Has mobile ticketing's time finally arrived?

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UPWARDLY MOBILE

While long on potential and short on actual deployment, it may be that mobile ticketing's time has finally arrived, as a result of the marketing journey it can help initiate

Going to an event is an experience and, in this day and age of social networking, of tweeting one's every move, experience is all. So how can stadia and event venues tap into this trend and, where possible, fill in the 'experience blanks' to generate extra revenue?

Mobile ticketing provides an obvious starting point. The mobile phone is a potential wallet, a social networking terminal and a personal communications line all in one – a fact not lost on brands looking to better target their marketing and engage more fully with consumers. For stadia, where once they had the opportunity to perhaps do away with paper ticketing in favour of a barcode on a phone, now they are looking at a channel that reaches into the pocket of their customers before, during and after the event.

"At the moment, the football experience begins and ends with buying a ticket," said Jonathan MacDonald, founder of JME.net, speaking at the M-football conference held in London in January. "But getting to the game, finding somewhere to park, meeting up with your friends, interacting with the match, posting photos on Facebook, finding the bar, buying a pie, going to the toilet, finding your friends again, buying a shirt, getting home and talking about

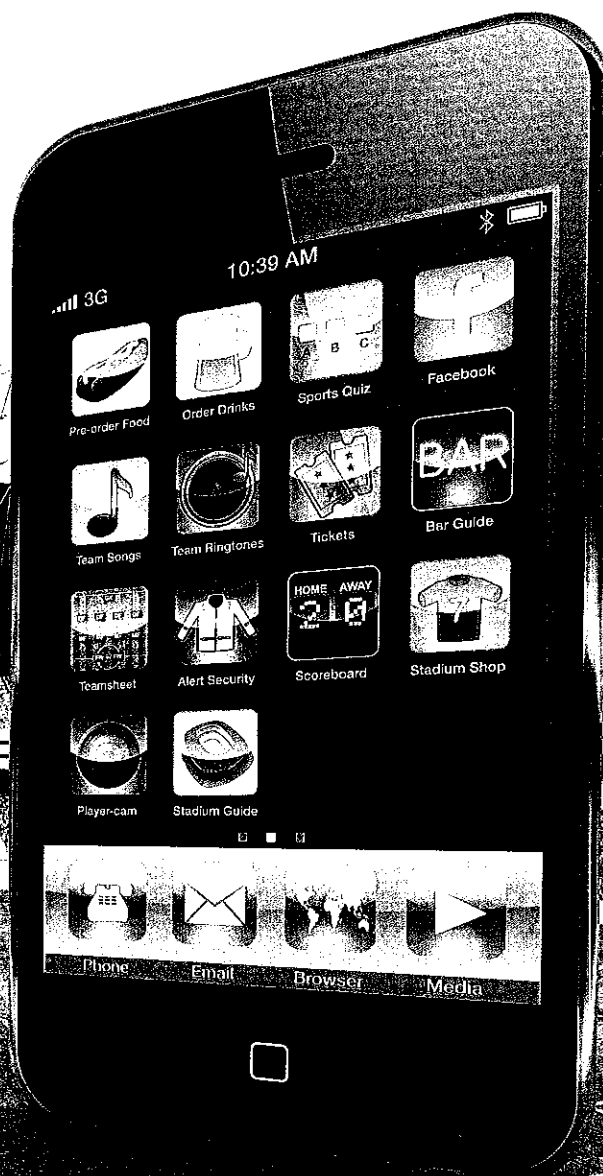
the match are all pretty much ad hoc. Mobile is the only tool that can help make all of these aspects of attending a football match come together."

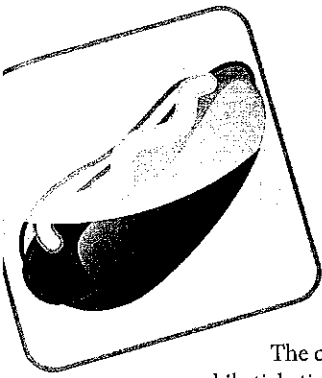
Signed, sealed and delivered

So what are the key opportunities for venue operators and their marketing partners? "Mobile is ideal for last-minute ticketing offers, getting 'opted-in' people – typically fans of the football clubs of certain events – to receive simple text messages about last-minute ticket availability," says Ariya Priyasanth, global head of couponing and ticketing at mobile services company 2Ergo.

"Once you have someone with a mobile ticket, you can pull out all the rest of the goodies that mobile has to offer in a sports arena," says Chris Smith, creative director at mobile marketing and experiential agency New Toy. "This is where mobile's potential actually lies."

From a fan's point of view, this can be an array of interesting team- or event-related facts, wallpapers and ringtones, quizzes and other content. From an event sponsor's point of view – and where the venue will derive revenue from the technology – it can be special offers and other opt-in services that can generate detailed customer relationship management information about the audience.





The crucial element – and why mobile ticketing is so central – is that you can't really interact with people via mobile without their say so. Offering deals on last-minute tickets requires fans to sign up. Once signed up – and with the right boxes ticked – the venue or service provider has pretty much free access (within reason) to those people, and the data collected about them.

World of opportunity

Around an event such as this summer's FIFA World Cup in South Africa, there is already a huge opportunity to service fans with simple text-based offerings that will work on all handset types.

"Trivia games and stats are what work really well in Africa on mobiles," says Sean Pashley from Starfish Mobile, a South African mobile development company. "It has to be topical and 'at the top of people's heads' and has to run off SMS. You can't underestimate the power of low-end handsets on the Continent."

Starfish has done this sort of thing before, working around other African football tournaments in Nigeria. "The key is to intersperse the football quiz questions with psychological and location-based questions too, so that you can build a simple profile of the person you are dealing with, as this has huge value. You can then sell brands the chance to send targeted SMS adverts."

Perhaps the simplest mobile service that stadia owners can offer fans, and the one that really sums up why mobile has a role to play in stadia, is one that is being pioneered at US college football games and NASCAR racing – trouble alerts. Numerous college and professional sports venues now use text-based services where fans can anonymously alert stadium security of problems with other fans. So, if someone sitting behind them is really drunk and abusive – or presumably if someone in front has an outlandishly large hat on – fans can text security and have the problem 'dealt with'. "Some companies are charging thousands of dollars for an emergency text message stadium alert system," says Bob Bentz, president of Advanced Telecom Services, which offers these services. "With our system, stadiums can pay US\$99 and get up to 1,000 text message alerts for the venue. That's way more than most need."

The next step

Many venues are also thinking more laterally and looking at how to use camera phones, smartphones, text voting, WiFi connectivity and services such as



REALITY CHECK

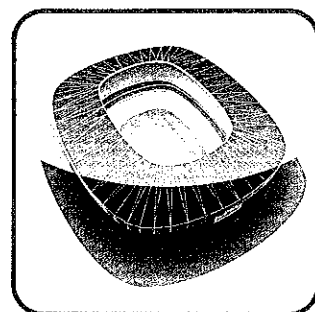
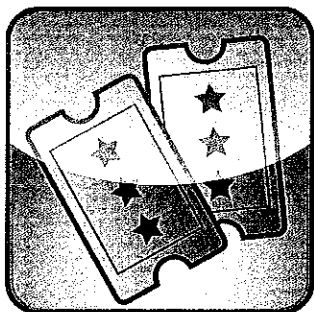
One of the hottest topics in mobile technology in 2010 is augmented reality (AR) and many see sports as the first place it will make its mark. Dutch AR pioneer Layar sees this year's FIFA World Cup as the real springboard for this. "People can place messages from anywhere in the world that appear on the pitch when viewed through augmented reality," says Claire Boonstra, co-founder of Layar. "You can add virtual goal posts and play penalty shoot-out at any location round the world; or hold up the handset over a player on the pitch and get all his tournament stats. On a more practical level you can use it to find bars and restaurants around your location before or after the match – use your imaginations."

New Toy's creative director Chris Smith believes that the key application for AR will be users pointing their phones at the number on the players' shorts to get a whole load of stats popping up on their phones. Smith thinks this will become a staple of the football experience. "Having sat through many West Ham games, I often feel I'd like something else to watch," he says.

augmented reality (see sidebar above) to redefine the sporting experience.

"In Slovenia, the Lenovo Team stadium has a video at the entrances that shows a virtual mobile soccer game that can be downloaded," says Tomi Ahonen, author and consultant at the *Forum Oxford Journal*. "The service is sponsored and the fans pay to download it, then use the keypad to play. It gives them something to do while they are waiting for kick-off. In Pittsburgh, the Penguins ice hockey team has a special Penguin Cam service to mobile, which offers users access to special cameras out on the ice, on players' helmets and in the dressing rooms.





This all adds to the personalisation and movement of the people at sporting events."

Ahonen also points to how US news channel CNN is using fans with mobiles to generate fan reporting and photo and video footage, linking it to chat and other fan interaction to help "expand the moment".

Elaborate plans also exist to try and use real-time voting to get a view from fans as to whether the referee's decision is right or not, for instance. This idea of using mobile technology to let fans shape the game almost led to one of the most outlandish reality TV shows never to hit our screens. "The 45,000 people at a Chelsea game every week think they know better than the management, so we decided to see if we could find a club willing to let text-voting fans control the team sheet each week and assess how successful this would be," says Mark Curtis, CEO of Flirtomatic. "Stevenage Town agreed and Channel 4 said they'd make a reality show of it. Sadly the FA said no. But it's only a matter of time before mobile is being used to influence the game."

ticket redemption infrastructure required. While the experts agree that mobile ticketing is the ideal starting point to take visitors to a venue on a rollercoaster of tickets, coupons, user-generated content and value adds, getting mobile ticketing up and running at a venue isn't that easy. "You need scanners that can scan simple 2D barcodes at the turnstiles, and these cost money," says 2Ergo's Priyasantha. In fact a scanner tends to cost between £500 and £1,000, so potentially the infrastructure costs look daunting.

"But most fans won't be using mobile ticketing, they will be using normal ticketing," says New Toy's Smith. "60% of tickets sold today for events are on paper, 39% are emailed and only 5% are on mobile. So you only really need a few turnstiles equipped with scanners to make this work. As it grows you add more scanners, but it will be growing because it is generating incremental revenues. The return on investment (ROI) is potentially very good." Smith says many premiership football clubs in the UK and other venues worldwide are already investing in mobile ticketing. "They wouldn't be doing that unless there was a clear ROI path. These guys don't spend on anything unless it will generate more money back," he says.

Mobile interaction can be used to create loyalty and increase incremental spending on things within the stadium

Keep it simple

But while all this high-tech stuff is being mooted for the FIFA World Cup and the 2012 Olympic Games, the simple, straightforward text service is still seen as the key method for venues to start their mobile engagement with fans.

"If it was down to me, I would just build a simple text-only alert service that sends the scores, fixtures, team information, that sort of thing," says David Gibbs, general manager of Sky Mobile. "I would also build-in different tariffs depending on how quickly you want to get that information."

With all these applications and potential uses starting with mobile ticketing, venues wanting to get in on the act are going to have to invest in the

Money machine

In fact, in Smith's view, mobile ticketing is highly attractive to sports arenas because all the data capture, ticket sending, process management and content is handled by someone else. "All the venue has to do is invest in some scanners or kiosks to allow redemption, and once they have them they can continue to monetise them – it's a one-off investment," he says. "Mobile interaction can be used to create loyalty and increase incremental spending on things within the stadium. "It can also generate better revenues from sponsors as it offers a far more immersing experience for their customers, and generates useful data that can be monetised in other ways later on. And it all starts with mobile ticketing." ■

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